



Ella Sims

Birth: 1924

Death: January 23, 2013

In 1924, Ella Sims was born in Summer, MS, and went to a one-room school house until she was 15. Then she “went across the river on a ferry boat to Helen, AR, and stayed with relatives” in order to attend high school.

In 1975, she completed her bachelor’s degree.

Ella’s father was a Baptist minister, and her mother was an invalid, as a result of polio, and died when Ella was almost 15 years old. They family moved often around the State of Arkansas. Ella was the middle child of three daughters. She also had to step-brothers from her father’s first marriage. According to Ella, everyone worked in the cotton fields “from sun up to sun down.” She also noted that she “played the role of a boy for [her] dad” and did not learn how to cook until after she was married and learned from her mother-in-law.

The three sisters sang in church. By 12-years-old, Ella was also writing her own papers and speeches and presenting them in church. Her social life consisted of church, annual revivals, and big picnics. When she was only nine-years-old, Ella said she was “saved,” a very memorable event for her as she remembered the exact date: August 11, 1933.

From that date, the motivating factors in her life were service and a belief in life after death. Ella said she witnessed her father who, even among much racial tension and violence, never seemed to be afraid to die.

At the age of 17 (11th grade), Ella was married and had a son who died in 1944 when he was only 10 months old. Another son, Jimmy, was born the next year on September 28. In December 1945, her husband died. Because she was so despondent over her losses, Ella’s doctor recommended she get away for a little while. She had a cousin in Grand Rapids, MI, so Ella came for a visit in March 1946. She never went back to Helen, AK. That same year she met her second husband to be and was married in 1947. They were married for 20 years and had seven children.

In Grand Rapids, Ella became active in her church and the children’s school. She said she raised not only her own seven children, but also the neighborhood children. In the 1960s she was the PTA president and served on many boards of city organizations. She learned her leadership skills in grassroots organizations from her involvement in the Office of Economic Opportunity. Ella

called herself a “product of OEO (poverty) programs.” One example is Ella’s service as a volunteer and then board member of Kent-Cap. She served on the board from 1965 to 1974. In 1984, the organization closed down.

Another example is her many years of service as a founding member and vice president of the Aquinas College Women’s Resource Center’s (WRC) board. She was one of two black women founders. (The other one was Shirley Collier Perkins.) Ella also helped get funding for this project through the Kellogg Foundation, which at the time was focusing on minority poverty. Reflecting on this experience, Ella said she “learned a lot” about differences between blacks and whites in working in groups. Because of her work on the WRC board, the president of Aquinas College at the time, Norbert Hruby, asked her to join the college board of directors.

Ella concluded that throughout the years of serving on several boards, she was often not only the only black, but also the only woman. Nevertheless, she would serve only if she could actively participate in the work of the board. For instance, Ella was on the Right to Life board. She rarely attended meetings, and yet because of “her name,” she was asked to remain on the board. After 6 years, she sent a resignation letter, saying she wanted to do more than just be a name on a list.

At the time of the interview (1994), Ella was volunteering to work with young women at her church and throughout the city. For instance, she was leading a prayer group for those who were trying to lose weight.

In addition to serving on two boards at Aquinas College, in January 1976, Ella was hired as a counselor to support the first group of 125 minority students to come to the college. As a result of a million dollar grant awarded to the school the previous year, these students had been recruited from across the country. The recruiter who had also acted as a counselor had departed for another job. By the time she became the program’s counselor, 40 students had already left and the 85 who remained were “fighting” among themselves, according to Ella. First, she organized cars, so the students could get off campus on the weekends to attend church or socialize with other young black people. She helped them connect with black alumni mentors. Furthermore, she recruited local black donors and local black students for the program.

Other Resources

2013 Obituary:

<http://obits.mlive.com/obituaries/grandrapids/obituary.aspx?pid=162756167>